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FOR WHA/CEN - ROIS BEAL

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SUBJECT: BELIZE: ELECTION GENERALLY PROCEEDS SMOOTHLY

REFS: A) BELMOPAN 63; B) BELMOPAN 64

¶1. As of approximately 1600 local time (1700 Washington time) Belize's election is proceeding smoothly. The Embassy's 16 observers have visited dozens of polling stations throughout the country and have generally found officials well-organized and lines of voters moving smoothly.

¶2. There have been reports of irregularities, both from Embassy observers and the media. These have been concentrated in the Belize City area. Embassy observers have witnessed cash payments, presumably for votes, and there have been credible reports of vote-buying in several downtown constituencies. We have also seen variations in the application of election regulations by polling officers, particularly concerning the presence of cell phones in the voting area. The opposition and the media have raised concerns that cell phone camera photos of a completed ballot can be traded for cash; the Election Commission originally said that it had no authority to ban cell phones, but just before the election reversed itself. Unfortunately the word did not apparently get out, or has not always been enforced, as reports from some polling places indicate that cell phone cameras are in use.

¶3. An additional area of confusion has been the referendum on an elected Senate that is being held concurrently with the general election. Reports of participation in the separate referendum ballot vary widely from polling station to polling station. Some voters are not voting in the referendum, either deliberately or inadvertently, and some have mistakenly put ballots into the wrong box. Whether misplaced ballots will be counted or not is still an open question.

¶4. Polls close at 1800 local time (1900 in Washington) and vote counting will begin roughly two hours later. Depending on how close the vote is and how many recounts are needed, results may not be known until well into the day on Friday.

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